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ABSTRACT

This preliminary study examines the perceptions of mentoring relationships between cooperating teachers and student teachers as they impact practicum success or failure. Student teachers (N=74) and cooperating teachers (N=13) at 2 teacher preparation sites were asked to respond either orally or in writing to 3 questions: (1) When you think of a mentor, what qualities come to mind? (2) What are the responsibilities of a mentee? and (3) What factors contribute to a successful student teaching experience? Sets of student teacher responses and cooperating teacher responses are provided. Three vignettes describe failed mentor-mentee relationships and illustrate just a few of the difficulties that arise when expectations and responsibilities between cooperating teachers and supervising teachers are either unarticulated or incompatible. Preliminary findings suggest that letters of recommendation and grades do not adequately reflect the quality of the relationships between cooperating and student teachers, that cooperating teachers tend to function as advisors to student teachers rather than as mentors, and that mentoring takes place on an ad hoc basis and has not yet been identified explicitly as an expectation in preservice teacher education. (Contains 19 references.) (LL)

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Mentor or Tormentor: The Role of the Cooperating Teacher in Student Teacher Success

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Abstract

This research explores and examines the quality and perceptions of mentoring relationships between cooperating teachers and student teachers as they impact practicum success or failure in two teacher preparation programs.

Mentor or Tormentor: The Role of the Cooperating Teacher in Student Teacher Success

Student teaching is often thought of as the "capstone" experience in teacher education, the culminating activity in preservice professional preparation. Researchers have recently begun to examine the issue of preservice teachers who "fail" student teaching and the circumstances that contribute to their failure. A presupposed but uncritically examined assumption of both preservice teachers and teacher preparation institutions is that cooperating teachers in field placement classrooms act as mentors on behalf of their student teachers, helping them to translate theory to practice. However, due to misunderstandings or miscommunication about roles and expectations, some student teacher-cooperating teacher dyads appear to be "tormentor" relationships. There is little in the literature that addresses this dynamic, particularly as it relates to student teacher success or failure.

This preliminary study explores expectations, perceptions, and qualities of mentoring relationships between cooperating teachers and student teachers at two teacher preparation institutions. Specifically, it aims to isolate salient features or dimensions of the mentor relationship which, if absent, will contribute to unsatisfactory and unsuccessful mentoring and/or student teaching experiences.

Review of the Literature

Relevant research is drawn from two emerging research areas: the literature on failure in student teaching and the literature on mentoring in teacher education. Prior to the last few years, little if any research had specifically focused on student teachers who fail (Coolican, 1992; Knowles & Hoefler, 1989; Knowles & Sudzina, 1991, 1992; Sudzina & Knowles, 1992, 1993), although the issue has been alluded to in the research on

student teaching and teacher education (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Lanier & Little, 1986; Pape & Dickens, 1990; Schwab, 1989). Our own experiences also suggest that unsuccessful practicum experiences regularly occur in teacher preparation programs, however, according to Johnson and Yates (1982), few students teachers actually receive a failing grade, which may further obscure the scope and nature of this problem.

Sudzina and Knowles (1992, 1993) examined 25 cases of "failed" student teachers over a 10 year period at two research sites. While most of the failures correlated with weak preservice classroom skills, contextual conditions of the placement were problematic in a number of the cases examined. In addition, for reasons such as personality conflicts, philosophical differences, and cultural misunderstandings, some student teacher-cooperating teacher pairs failed to develop into successful mentor-mentee relationships. Unfortunately, this latter cohort group often have few choices open to them: some remain in their placements and struggle through their practicums receiving weak letters of recommendation; others fail at the conclusion of their practicums; still others request to be withdrawn from their initial placements and to repeat their practicums at new sites. The possibilities for preventing such mismatches, and dealing appropriately with them when they do occur, need to be defined, acknowledged, and addressed.

At the same time, there have been calls from within the profession to redefine and improve preservice field experiences, particularly as they relate to student teaching (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1990; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984; Zeichner, 1986), and to explore the role of mentoring in developing successful teachers (Bey, 1992; Enz, 1992; Ganser, 1993; Head, Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall, 1992; Odell, 1990).

A mentor in teacher development has commonly been described as a supporter, sponsor, guide, counselor, protector, encourager and confidant (Odell, 1990). Attributes ascribed to successful mentors include thoughtfulness and self-reflection, integrity, an

outgoing personality, pedagogical and communicative competence, and an understanding of the mentee's developmental needs (Enz, 1992). Recommended support appropriate to student teachers' needs includes supervising and guiding teacher candidates in making the transition between theory and practice (Bey, 1992).

Benefits and obstacles to mentoring were reported in a study of mentor and beginning teachers by Ganser (1993). Of the twenty-one benefits listed, support and encouragement and fitting in the new school for the beginning teacher, and learning about new ideas and satisfaction in helping someone for the mentor teacher, were reported most often. Fourteen obstacles were also prioritized; lack of time for meetings and observations; personality conflicts between the beginning teacher and mentor teacher; lack of administrative support; new role for mentor teacher, lack of training; and, mismatch between the beginning teacher and mentor teacher in terms of teaching assignment and ideology were reported most frequently.

According to Head, Reiman, and Thies-Sprinthall (1992), genuine mentor-protege relationships occur when both parties are equally committed to the goals and when the mentor possesses broad career and personal influence over the mentee. When only one party in the relationship is committed to the outcomes, and the mentor serves as a career resource, the mentor function is reduced to that of a coach or role model for the protege. Thus, real mentoring is a complex activity involving awareness of the process and function for both the mentor and the mentee with benefits for both parties (Head, et al, 1992).

Mentors and Mentees?

Perceptions and Expectations

Student teachers (ST) and cooperating teachers (CT) at two teacher preparation sites were asked to respond either orally or in writing to three questions: (1) When you think of a mentor, what qualities come to mind?; (2) What are the responsibilities of a

mentee?; and, (3) What factors do you think contribute to a successful student teacher experience?

Student teacher responses

Ideally, when student teachers (n= 74) thought of mentoring and mentor qualities, they thought of supportive role models. They saw their own responsibilities as accepting constructive criticism, working hard, and being willing to change and to try new things. They attributed success in student teaching to a positive relationship with their CT and a supportive work environment. Their biggest fear was that their CT would not let them try new ideas or "let go" of the class. Additionally, they were concerned that their CT would not be open and honest and/or communicate clearly with them. In practice, student teacher perceptions of what mentoring is, how it happens, or doesn't happen, can be illuminating:

> Mentoring? Honestly, I've never thought all that much about it in real concrete terms. I figure that in education everyone should be a mentor, right? And student teaching -- well, if you ever need a mentor, it's then!
>
> If a mentor is someone who listens, someone who cares about what you and how you do it, and who will support you no matter what, then it sure wasn't my cooperating teacher who was my mentor; it was [supervising teacher].
>
> What really makes a difference in a mentor/mentee relationship, in any relationship, I think, is what each partner contributes. Sometimes we tend to think that it's all the mentor's responsibility, when in reality, I think it might even be more the [our] responsibility to set the tone and expectations.
>
> My CT? No way was [she] a mentor. Unless you mean that a mentor should ignore you, should expect you to be able to do certain things but never bother to tell you, and should correct you in front of the kids. But then, I never really expected [her] to be a mentor; I mean, what *is* a mentor, exactly? And why didn't you tell anyone ever tell us to look for one?
>
> I should be able to do this on my own. No one should have to help me. I'm here [at school] to learn how to be a teacher...I don't want anyone talking to me about it. You know, talking about something never helps; people should just do what they have to do.

> My CT was so incredibly busy that I quickly realized that it was up to me to establish what our relationship was going to be like. It was great -- but I made sure that we talked about our mutual expectations and that [she] knew what I needed.

Cooperating teacher responses

Cooperating teacher responses (n=13) basically fell into two camps: those who saw mentoring student teachers as a hierarchical enterprise in which student teachers needed "to do more" and to follow their lead in the classroom; and, those who saw mentoring as a shared enterprise between the CT and ST. Although both groups mentioned many mentor qualities (leader, helper, open-minded, sense of humor, knowledgeable, organized, good listener), and mentee responsibilities (receptive to constructive criticism, willingness to work, adequate preparation, cooperative, good rapport with children) in common, they saw their roles and that of the ST teacher somewhat differently.

Those CTs who saw themselves "in charge" describe the relationship as follows:

> [A mentor is] someone older, wiser, and less excitable. Youth should have [exposure to] energy, age, wisdom. The ST should be attentive without being slavish. If they [ST] bring enthusiasm and a love of learning, a good mentor can guide them to the rest.

> [A mentor is] positive role model with high moral standards, able to communicate to ST a love for the teaching profession. The ST should cooperate with the CT and be a loving caretaker of the children; develop good observation skills and pick up teaching techniques of mentor; plan lessons and help with extra-class duties. Willingness of the ST to "go that extra mile" and a class of children easy to manage [contributes to successful ST experience].

> A mentor is a good example; [the ST should have:] a willing attitude and follow class rules and guidelines; cooperative spirit, good communication and planning, willingness to do a little "extra" (more than required).

> The ST is: highly committed; not afraid to take control of the class; needs to be responsible and mature; well-informed; is always taking notes and striving to be the best he/she can be; [should] observe mentor's teaching when invited.

Cooperating teachers who see mentoring student teachers as more of a shared responsibility describe their roles and that of student teachers a little differently:

> [A mentor is] somebody who knows what they are talking about but doesn't make you feel inferior; somebody who cares if you succeed or not. Both parties have to be willing to learn from one another. Getting to know one another, other interests, family, hobbies, etc. [contribute to a successful student teacher experience].
>
> I'm a mentor, definitely. And yet, that doesn't mean that I'm "in charge" -- I think mentoring is a negotiated concept, and that both the CT and ST need to be very careful to be explicit about the roles and expectations.
>
> A mentor possesses open mindedness and is ready for new ideas and methods. Listening to each other's ideas, freedom to be creative, respecting each other's style of teaching [are factors in ST success].
>
> Gentle leading, cooperation, willingness to learn, let ST have the freedom to do or try things, intervene only when necessary, offer as much help as needed, have a sense of humor...[contribute to a successful student teacher experience].
>
> [A mentor is] one who guides with good ideas, however allowing the student teacher's own creativity to shape the lesson; always supportive; communicates with mentee.

In the first set of examples, the burden appears to be on the student teacher to meet the cooperating teacher's personal expectations, expectations which may extend be beyond the scope of university student teaching expectations and preparation. In the second set of examples, cooperating teachers appear to be more sensitive and accommodating to student teachers' developmental needs and perspectives. Whether and how these perceived beliefs translate to practice remains to be seen.

Three Vignettes

The stories of three failed mentor-mentee relationships illustrate just a few of the difficulties that arise when expectations and responsibilities between cooperating teachers and supervising teachers are either unarticulated or incompatible. In the first case, a "master teacher" and excellent student teacher fail to make connections about realistic student teaching expectations; in the second case, two non-communicative

individuals clash philosophically and pedagogically over behavior management and teaching styles; in the third case, a mentor teacher deals with a recalcitrant student teacher who resists and ultimately avoids mentoring, resulting in a failed relationship as well as a failed practicum.

Kelly

Kelly, 21, an excellent preservice teacher, was eager to student teach. She requested, and received, a whole language placement at a suburban public elementary school known for its innovative and creative methods. Joan, 45, her cooperating teacher, was considered a master teacher and a leader in whole language methodology in her school district. After years of teaching fifth grade "traditionally", Joan had discovered whole language, a method that integrates reading and writing across the curriculum, and now believed that it was the only way to teach. She had taken whole language classes at the university and, afterwards, had even assisted in some of those classes.

Joan, a warm and personable teacher, ran a structured classroom but encouraged her students to be very creative and open. She enjoyed having student teachers because she liked having someone look up to her and learn from her. Initially, everything was wonderful. Kelly followed Joan's lead in teaching language arts and social studies and basically imitated everything she did.

Trouble arrived mid-practicum for Kelly in the form of an assignment from Joan to write and teach a chemistry unit in a whole language format. Kelly had not observed other teachers teaching science nor had Joan taught science to her students. Kelly felt as if she were left hanging. Joan gave Kelly the teacher's guide but told her not to use it. Instead, she was given a list of topics to cover, told to conduct daily experiments, and integrate reading and writing assignments creatively with the content. Expectations as to the amount of work and depth of coverage needed were unclear This extra teaching assignment mid-semester seemed overwhelming to Kelly. She knew that when most

student teachers "solo", they teach a unit that they had developed prior to student teaching. Feeling frustrated and inadequate, and unable to live up to her cooperating teacher's extremely high expectations, Kelly turned to her supervising teacher for help.

Her supervising teacher assessed the situation and decided that to intervene with the cooperating teacher might send the wrong messages, possibly reinforcing Kelly's feelings of inadequacy as well as turning Joan into an adversary. Instead, with the assistance of a science education professor, Kelly and her supervising teacher planned and organized the unit with whole language accoutrements. Removing herself emotionally from her relationship with Joan, Kelly completed the practicum with few bumps and received a glowing letter of recommendation from Joan. Joan had realized that things were not working well between them, yet had not been able to shift gears to accommodate Kelly's developmental needs for mentorship, flexibility and support as a novice teacher.

Perhaps Joan knew "too much" about how to write the perfect whole language lesson and had expectations for the ideal student teacher from her exposure to the university. Kelly felt as if she couldn't share her feelings with Joan because Joan expected her to do everything right the first time. Joan, on the other hand, wanted to share her ideas with Kelly, and was frustrated when Kelly couldn't integrate and absorb them all. Joan had extremely high standards and found it very difficult to give Kelly developmental support and constructive criticism Her attitude was "do it and do it well". It seems as if Joan had forgotten what it was like to be a beginning teacher, experimenting with different teaching methods, unable to master all content areas and teach "with total creativity", skills that develop with experience.

Liz

Liz, Marge's first student teacher, caught her off guard. She had expected someone younger and here was Liz, married with two children, and about her own age, 45. Marge ran a very physically free and open classroom and was a little uncomfortable

and unsure about having someone in to observe her and teach in her classroom. Although the university offered orientation classes on the supervision of student teachers, Marge had been unable to attend and seemed unclear as to what was expected of her. But it was only for 10 weeks, so Marge figured everything would be fine. Besides, her principal had assigned Liz to her so she must be doing something right.

Liz and Marge spent the first two weeks of the practicum avoiding each other. Liz was totally distracted and distraught by what she observed, and perceived, as no behavior management guidelines in the classroom: one boy spent most of his time crawling around the floor or treating his table area like a jungle gym. Other children seemed to move around the room at will. It all looked like chaos to Liz. Liz's supervising teacher described Liz as a "warm fuzzy" type of person, not shy, but unassertive. When Liz meekly approached her cooperating teacher about her discipline and class rules, Marge retorted, "It's obvious what I expect. All you have to do is watch." It wasn't obvious to Liz what Marge was expecting and it didn't look like anything she had learned about classroom management during teacher preparation. But it worked for Marge.

Although Marge seemed to be getting her content across to her students, Liz was becoming more and more panicky. Liz had expected to use a whole language orientation in her practicum, based on her university course work, but Marge taught each subject separately. Marge seemed unwilling or unable to articulate her pedagogical and philosophical orientations, choices and decisions. The prospects for a successful student teaching experience seemed dire. Liz's reaction was, "Get me out of here!'

Marge's principal was unwilling to accept that a student teacher had failed at his school and was determined to keep Liz there. Besides, there were no other teachers and/or placements available at this time for Liz. This had to work out. He talked to both parties and they agreed to try again. Marge sat down with Liz weekly to go over her discipline routine and lessons; they began to talk and Liz learned a great deal. However, it was decided that Liz would have a separate discipline plan and lessons

when she taught; Marge's teaching and discipline style was just too different from what Liz expected, and was able to follow. Liz successfully completed her practicum and received faint praise from Marge in a very weak letter of recommendation. It was not an experience either of them would care to repeat.

Amanda

Amanda arrived late and unprepared for her first day of student teaching at a small Catholic high school in a suburban area, a practicum setting she had requested. Michael, her cooperating teacher, had agreed to supervise Amanda, 22 years old, even though he had reservations after his initial interview with her. However, he ascribed her lack of conversation and ability to articulate specific expectations about student teaching to initial nervousness and uncertainty. In retrospect, these inauspicious beginnings set the tone for the rest of the semester.

Amanda struggled from day one with typical novice issues, such as grading, lesson plans, and appropriate classroom demeanor with the students, and resisted all assistance. For example, Michael had suggested that together they set up a grading scheme and schedule for evaluating a set of class essays to familiarize her with the students' work before she actually starting teaching them. Amanda replied with what would soon become a typical refrain: " No thank you. I should be able to do this on my own." Assuming that Amanda would ask for help if she needed it, Michael gave her the essays to be graded within the week. Amanda never asked, and Amanda never graded the papers. She was overwhelmed by the task.

Amanda's stiffly formal and unapproachable teaching style fared no better in communicating American literature to a class of juniors, who often left the classroom confused and frustrated. Even when her cooperating teacher and university supervisor worked together helping her adjust lesson plans and lecture notes and assisting her with outside resources, they were met alternately with resistance and despair for their efforts.

Amanda made it clear, repeatedly , that this was her responsibility, and that "if I can't do it, well. I'll just have to accept that".

Michael, an English teacher with fifteen years experience, had mentored many student teachers. He is careful to set clear and appropriate expectations and to negotiate the process with each ST. He encourages them to set their own pace and is very cognizant of the need to provide support for them as they begin the processes of teaching, managing the classroom and developing a vision of themselves as teachers. Until Amanda, Michael had only positive experiences with his student teachers.

Amanda, according to Michael, was "one of the most perplexing and challenging people I've met during my career, and without a doubt, the most difficult student teacher I've ever had. I felt as though there was nothing that I could do to help her and that she didn't want to be helped." As she so often stated, Amanda operated on the assumption that learning to teach was entirely up to her, and that to accept or invite the involvement of others in the process was a sign of personal and professional weakness. Amanda ultimately failed student teaching, largely due to her unwillingness to engage in a process of self-reflection and analysis that might have moved her from the isolation of her own self-imposed (perhaps, unobtainable) standards to the support and collegiality that Michael repeatedly offered.

Discussion

Teacher preparation institutions take great care to provide preservice teachers with models of best practices in their university settings. Cooperating teachers in practicum placements, however, are rarely subject to the same critical selection criteria as teacher educators for a variety of reasons. The most obvious reason is the sheer number of cooperating teachers that are needed to supervise individual student teachers. Practicum placements in local schools are often based on such factors as cooperating teacher availability, location, and grade level or subject matter

considerations. Information about individual cooperating teachers is largely unknown and matches with preservice teachers' characteristics are, for the most part, arbitrary. While this appears not to be a problem for the majority of student teachers, every year a small minority fails to attain positive practicum experiences. In obvious instances, student teachers' difficulties could be traced back to their own shortcomings in translating theory to practice. In other instances, however, sources of difficulties were more subtle and difficult to document. In these cases, it appears as if personality and pedagogical conflicts between the cooperating teacher and the student teacher precipitated negative classroom interactions and weak summative evaluations.

When conflicts arose, the function of mentoring was often neglected, unexamined or impossible. In Kelly's case, her CT seemed to view mentoring as a sort of "show and tell" process by which Kelly should be able to watch and listen and then perform to standards which reflected more mature, experienced teacher behaviors. Liz, on the other hand, was placed with a CT who seemed to resent her as well as the expectation to serve as her mentor. Liz was rebuffed when she sought her CTs guidance and assistance, and her CT alternately ignored her or viewed Liz's frustration as evidence of incompetence. Amanda was offered mentoring by her CT, but was either unable or unwilling to accept this assistance and to engage in the type of self-reflection and analysis that would support her personal and professional development as a teacher.

In each of these cases, and in both teacher preparation programs, mentoring was never explicitly mentioned as an expectation between CTs and STs. It was assumed that individuals would just "know what to do" and do it. When questioned about factors that contribute to student teacher success, both CTs and STs overwhelmingly responded that a good relationship, open communication, and a positive work environment were key. It seems clear that teacher education programs need to do more then to take these factors and circumstances for granted.

Conclusions and Implications

Preliminary findings suggest that letters of recommendation and grades do not adequately reflect the quality of the relationships, practicum placements, and expectations between cooperating and student teachers. Clearly some pairs "hit it off" and form mutually satisfying relationships during the practicum. Other student teachers struggle under the tyranny of "good" teachers who believed that there was only one way to do things ... their way, and/or demanded double the work required by the university to demonstrate competence. Still other student teachers found themselves in mismatched situations with congenial, if uncommunicative, cooperating teachers whose pedagogical and philosophical orientations were very different from their own, causing confusion, stress, and, on occasion, the need for external intervention from university-supervisors or school principals to "salvage" the situation.

This preliminary study suggests that CTs tend to function as advisors to STs rather than mentors, as real mentoring is more complex activity involving mutually satisfying relationships that focus on both the process and functions of mentoring (Head, et al, 1992). Clearly, the logistical problems in matching up potential mentoring pairs, the condensed window of time and opportunity for CTs to mentor within the student teaching schedule, and the lack of training and expectations on the part of both the CT and ST, work against establishing mentoring relationships. Mentoring relationships currently appear to be the exception rather than the rule in student teaching, and their success, serendipitous.

Mentoring as a valued and coherent function within undergraduate teacher preparation takes place on an ad hoc basis and has not yet been identified explicitly as an expectation in preservice education. Until universities and CTs engage in dialogue concerning the importance and value of CTs as mentors and STs as mentees, advising may continue to be the most we can expect during the student teaching experience. Constructs such as mentoring are difficult to develop in preservice education programs,

due in no small part to the lack of conversations about shared understandings and mutual goals between universities and the schools in which student teachers are placed. Additionally, mentors and mentees must negotiate their relationships, and be equally cognizant and accepting of the ramifications and responsibilities of their roles.

Mentoring may not be a realistic expectation under present student teaching placement and organizational structures. However, both CTs and STs in this study ranked the quality of their relationship at or near the top of factors contributing to student teacher success. Explicit conversations about respective roles and expectations would assist in clearing up existing misconceptions and open the door for real mentoring to occur. If, as Richardson-Koehler suggests (1988), the cooperating teacher is most important in the triangle of cooperating teacher, student teacher and supervising teacher in facilitating the professional development of the student teacher, it behooves us to take seriously the particular and unique role of the cooperating teacher in mentoring relationships as they contribute to student teachers' successes or failures.

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